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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RPO DUBAI 000301

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SUBJECT: IRAN: SUPREME LEADER-AHMADINEJAD TUSSLE OVER NOMINEE BRINGS
CONSERVATIVE DISARRAY INTO THE OPEN

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: Supreme Leader Khamenei's intervention in a dispute among conservatives over President Ahmadinejad's pick for first vice president has further strained his status as the unchallenged arbiter of Iranian politics. Though Ahmadinejad did ultimately bow to the Supreme Leader's directive to remove Mashaei as vice president, Khamenei's victory was proved glaringly hollow by Ahmadinejad's decision to circumvent his critics by declaring Mashaei to be his chief of staff.

12. (C) Summary cont.: In the midst of the Mashaei drama, which has thrown Ahmadinejad's cabinet into disarray, the government was also compelled for the first time since the election to publicly acknowledge the death of a demonstrator while in custody. The brutal beating death of the son of an establishment figure has led many once-quiescent conservatives to publicly question the government's handling of the unrest and call for an investigation into the detainees' treatment -- stances that echo the demands of Mousavi, Karrubi and Rafsanjani. Perhaps in response to these challenges, the Supreme Leader's backers have resorted to issuing a flurry of statements of support that seem to highlight, rather than minimize, division among the establishment. Amid declarations that "202 Majles members" and "the majority of the Assembly of Experts" support the views of the Supreme Leader, the Revolutionary Guards stand out as a glaring exception to this sense that cohesion among the conservative establishment is fraying. In our view, events of the past week suggest that the Supreme Leader's political maneuverability is diminished, and he is ever more reliant on the IRGC. End summary.

Mashaei's "Resignation" Exposes Disarray Among Conservatives

13. (C) On July 25, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei announced that he "no longer considered himself to be first vice president," as Ahmadinejad grudgingly bowed to the Supreme Leader after digging in his heels and enduring nine days of withering criticism from conservative politicians and senior clerics who had immediately -- and very publicly -- objected to Ahmadinejad's elevation of his friend (and relative by marriage) to first vice president. Though conservatives ostensibly object to Mashaei for a 2008 comment viewed as "soft" on Israel and for his attendance at an "un-Islamic" cultural event in Turkey, an editorial in a

newspaper affiliated with the radical hardliner Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi criticized him for overstepping the boundaries of a layman by speculating publicly on theological issues such as religious pluralism. Other non-clerical figures in the principlist camp lamented the appointment as an indication that Ahmadinejad intends to staff his office and cabinet with his inner coterie at the expense of consensus figures. When Ahmadinejad held his ground, Khamenei sent a directive to Ahmadinejad advising him to undo the appointment; remarkably, Ahmadinejad only yielded after the Supreme Leader's handwritten letter, sent five days earlier, was published by the state media, thus forcing Ahmadinejad's hand. To add insult to injury, Ahmadinejad simply reassigned Mashaei as his chief of staff.

¶4. (C) Following the Mashaei resignation, Ahmadinejad abruptly dismissed his Minister of Intelligence July 26 while the Minister of Culture reportedly resigned amid reports the President was trying to force him out. Both men objected to the Mashaei appointment and walked out of a cabinet meeting last week following a well-publicized argument with Ahmadinejad. It is unclear if Ahmadinejad consulted with Khamenei before sacking the two ministers; appointments to these ministries are generally coordinated with, if not mandated by, the Supreme Leader. According to Iran's constitution, Ahmadinejad's entire cabinet now requires parliamentary review; however, it is unclear if the Majles has the authority or political will to initiate such a challenge before Ahmadinejad is inaugurated for his second term on August 5.

Detainee Death Further Undermines Conservative Unity

¶5. (C) In the midst of the Mashaei drama, the establishment has also been forced to reckon with the consequences of its

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repression of demonstrators with the case of Mohsen Ruholamini, the 25-year-old son of a prominent conservative who was arrested in street demonstrations on July 9 and died several days later, apparently as a result of wounds inflicted after he was taken to Evin Prison. Ruholamini's father, a doctor who is described in the press as a senior advisor to defeated presidential candidate and former Revolutionary Guards chief Mohsen Rezai, appears to be well respected, both personally and professionally, by IRIG heavyweights such as the (Supreme Leader-appointed) head of all state broadcasting as well as numerous principlist MPs. These friendships transcended the facade of conservative unity and resulted in a full-fledged funeral for Ruholamini in a large mosque in Tehran -- the first public ceremony for a demonstrator permitted by the government -- and elicited statements of unequivocal condemnation from conservative Majles members who until now had remained silent on the issue of the abuse of detainees, heretofore described as "rioters" by government hardliners.

¶6. (C) Perhaps sensing momentum on this issue, reformist opposition leaders were quick to try to leverage Ruholamini's violent death, issuing a flurry of statements building on Rafsanjani's July 17 call for the release of prisoners detained since the election. The day of Ruholamini's funeral, which was attended by many government officials (including a representative of the Supreme Leader), Mousavi and Karroubi sent a letter to the Interior Ministry requesting a permit to hold a commemoration ceremony for the other individuals killed since the election. According to state-affiliated media, the reformers promised the ceremony, scheduled for July 30 to mark the fortieth day of the demonstrators killed on June 20 (among them the now-iconic Neda Soltan), would include only Koranic recitations and all participants will be silent throughout the

event.

17. (C) The outcry over the treatment of detainees is also spilling over into the issue of forced confessions, specifically whether or not such confessions should be broadcast on state television. Majles members are now debating the issue, with many conservatives openly coming out against the idea, thereby coming down on the side of the argument held by the Mousavi and Rafsanjani camp. One Majles deputy, in a swipe at the security services, suggested that if such confessions were aired, then there should also be inquiries into how they were obtained.

18. (C) With cracks among the conservative establishment seemingly widening over Ahmadinejad's appointments and the abuse of detainees, Khamenei's supporters are trying to muster public proof of fealty to the Supreme Leader. In recent days state institutions have responded to Khamenei's pleas for unity by releasing press statements awkwardly proclaiming that "202 Majles members" and the "majority of the Assembly of Experts" support the Supreme Leader. While clearly intended to showcase the idea that Khamenei retains the preponderance of support among conservative figures, the declarations themselves expose a public dissention among the establishment that few would have thought possible just weeks ago.

IRGC Remains Solidly Behind Khamenei

19. (C) The Revolutionary Guards' top leaders are the noteworthy exception to this trend. While conservative cohesion is visibly fraying in many of Iran's key institutions, the IRGC leadership is going to great lengths to highlight its unwavering support for the Supreme Leader and the political structure he sits atop. The IRGC used the occasion of Guards Corps Day on July 26 to highlight its support for the Supreme Leader and trumpet its role in safeguarding the Revolution. Although inflated rhetoric typically accompanies such events, the IRGC's role in suppressing the post-election demonstrations and its emergence as the central pillar supporting Khamenei gives their comments additional weight, particularly as divisions emerge among hardliners. A senior IRGC commander this weekend praised Khamenei's role in undermining the plots against the country and attributed the armed forces' success in defusing the plots to the recommendations and guidelines of the Leader. Separately, an IRGC statement lauded Khamenei and condemned the

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post-election conduct of certain "influential political figures." And in playing up its role as the Revolution's pre-eminent guarantor, IRGC Commander Jafari said the Guard Corps is the "sole armed and organized supporter" of the Revolution and maintained their ability to take on "soft political, cultural, and economic threats."

Comment

10. (C) Though politics in Iran are notoriously factionalized, Khamenei previously had been able to play such divisions to his advantage; now, however, the divisions seem to be a weakness for the Supreme Leader. Khamenei has tried to portray the election unrest as merely a family squabble and has used praise, threats, and pleas to re-forge unity, or at least its facade, to little avail. Ahmadinejad's public delay in heeding Khamenei's order to drop Mashaei -- and his subsequent installation as advisor and chief of staff -- further undermined the Supreme Leader. Meanwhile the reformers continue to defy Khamenei's orders to

move on from the election dispute and in fact seem to be gaining traction among some conservatives over the emotive issue of detainees. By throwing his weight behind Ahmadinejad during the election, the Supreme Leader's political maneuverability has now been diminished and it appears he is ever more reliant on the IRGC.

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